



# Why we all really, really need cultural intelligence



In the second part of the series, **Dr Janine Brooks** discusses the need for cultural intelligence

## 1. The need for collaboration

We can't solve big problems alone. Leading across boundaries through collaboration is increasingly crucial. Dentistry needs to collaborate with other health professionals, public sector and private sector, if we are to beat oral disease.

## 2. The reality of networks

The world is becoming more connected. Leaders must build and leverage networks in order to deal with this new inter-connectivity and capitalise on the opportunities presented. A culturally intelligent dental leader knows there is more to having a successful dental business than being a clinician. We need to network with those outside dentistry, those in technology, communications and ethical marketing.

## 3. The importance of trust

People use services they trust, listen to sources they trust and choose to follow leaders they trust. It's much harder to establish our own trustworthiness with people whose frame of reference is very different. Dentistry is a multi-cultural profession serving a multi-cultural population of patients. Culturally intelligent dental professionals continually try to understand their patients, what is important to them about their lives and their oral health and what challenges they have. Understanding fosters trust.

## 4. The demands of demographics

Relationships between generations are becoming increasingly disconnected, right across the world. We need to bridge generational divides for both young and old alike. Culturally intelligent dental leaders know that they can learn from all age groups, whether that be colleagues, staff or patients.

## 5. The urban magnet

People around the world are moving to cities as never before. These cities are (or are fast becoming) magnets of talent, bringing together people from multiple backgrounds and different cultures. If you work in even

a large village these days you will find a diversity of cultures, the larger the place in which you work in the greater the diversity.

## 6. The diverse workforce

Dental professionals working in the UK are drawn from a multitude of countries and cultures. Many colleagues' primary qualification was achieved outside the UK. Culturally intelligent leaders know this brings huge opportunities but can also bring huge misunderstanding. Leaders with cultural intelligence go out of their way to know more about colleagues and use our differences to build stronger teams.

### Toe curling failures:

A survey of complaints from Thomas Cook and ABTA reported in Wanderlust Travel Magazine (2011) gives some great examples of failures of cultural intelligence.

*'It's lazy of the local shopkeepers to close in the afternoons. I often needed to buy things during 'siesta' time - this should be banned'*

*'On my holiday to Goa in India, I was disgusted to find that almost every restaurant served curry. I don't like spicy food at all.'*

*'There are too many Spanish people. The receptionist speaks Spanish. The food is Spanish. Too many foreigners now live abroad.'*

*'I was bitten by a mosquito, no-one said they could bite.'*

These may seem like caricatures, sadly they aren't. How sad that the people making these comments missed out on learning and tasting (literally) wonderful new experiences. Although I'm not sure about the mosquito! Listen out for examples of failing cultural intelligence in everyday conversations. Do this not to feel smug, but to use as questions for yourself. Have you ever caught yourself saying or thinking something similar? Be honest.

It is very difficult to know just how culturally intelligent we are. That's where feedback from others is so important. To get good feedback ask people from different cultural groups to tell you how culturally intelligent they rate you as being. Ask for real, critical friend feedback, what are you good at? Where are your blind spots? How might you get better and improve your cultural intelligence of their specific cultures? You could choose someone of a different age to you, a different gender, a different religion, from a different professional sub-culture. Ask them for feedback because you want to improve your cultural intelligence, listen to what they say, take it on board and think how you could use their feedback to enhance your cultural intelligence. Be curious about other cultures, ask enquiring questions and **LISTEN**.

### Core and Flex

Core and Flex help to define who we are, but they include more than just our identity. They account for everything from spirit to behaviours and habits, from grand beliefs to small actions. A well-defined Core and Flex underpins our ability to experience new things and adapt to other people without fear of losing who we are as individuals – changing and accommodating without ever compromising on what really matters. Sometimes the fear of losing who we are can be a real barrier to learning about new people and cultures.

### Core:

Our core is made up of things we would either never do or always do – the things about us that don't change no matter where we are. They are intrinsic to who we are and include our values or identity, and also our behaviours – the things we do that are core to who we are – they don't change, they remain

the same anywhere we are, without these values and behaviours we are not ourselves. They are defining attributes that others recognise about us.

Leaders need to know what is in their core, because if they are not aware of it – both the good and bad – they will confuse and unsettle themselves, and others, on a regular basis. A tighter, well understood core also makes it much easier when you have to flex. You know what you can give up or change and what you absolutely can't. By being constant this enhances the trust other people have in us. People know what to expect, there are no curve balls.

### Flex:

Our flex is made up of those aspects of ourselves that we adapt to differing circumstances, which aren't hardwired into who we are as individuals. Generally our flex is seen in our behaviours. Behaviours are very important signifiers, as we operate in other cultures, not least because they demonstrate that we have flex. As we start to go beyond behaviours and deeper into flex, it gets more complex. Flexing how we behave is one thing, we can do this consciously and in many ways it is a surface observation. We can behavior in a way that takes account of other cultures, but flexing what we believe gets very tough. If you don't truly believe in the behaviours you are exhibiting then you are not being authentic. The behaviour has to be underpinned by belief, it has to be done for real, in good faith, without flinching; otherwise it transmits a false pretence and others will know this. Behaviour without belief is just acting, you might be able to act well for a while, but eventually it will show through.

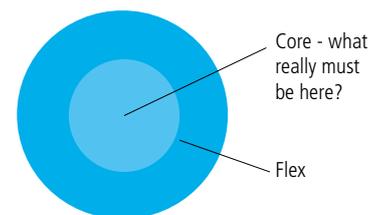
### Try this:

- List what you believe to be in your own Core and Flex.
- Think about values, behaviours, skills, beliefs and identity.
- List them fast.
- Don't stop to put them in any order.

Do this exercise very quickly, take no more than 1 minute, this is about your gut reactions, it should be fast and instinctive.

### Why have you chosen what you have?

It can be helpful to think about what you have chosen and perhaps discuss it with a friend. Think about your core and flex as in the diagram below – how big are the circles of core and flex? If your core is larger than your flex, why do you think that is? Do you really,



really need everything in your core, where are the possibilities to move values, behaviours, skills or beliefs into flex. Just talking this through can help your perspective. It can help even more to talk through with someone from a different culture. You may be surprised by how much core you share.

Over time as we grow and mature, our core is likely to get smaller and contain fewer things that really must be there. We learn what is really important to us and what we cannot change. We also learn that we can adapt and flexing is a natural part of increasing our cultural intelligence. However, it's important to understand that we retain the duality of having core values and, at the same time, the openness to challenge our beliefs and assumptions from experiences of different cultures. As it gets smaller, our core will also become sounder and more robust. Though this may sound counter-intuitive, the more inflexible our core becomes over time, the greater our ability to flex becomes, because we'll know where we genuinely can and where we genuinely can't move. All this improves our trustworthiness, and with it, our cultural intelligence.

I hope this article has given you pause for thought. I hope it has made you think a little more about the wonderful diversity we dental professionals live and work in and made you curious to learn more and develop your cultural intelligence. It's not something that you will achieve overnight, indeed it's an ongoing activity that you need to practice constantly. There will always be cultures you know little about, there will always be something new to learn. Don't be dismayed by that, be excited. People who develop their cultural intelligence constantly will never be short of friends. ♦

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